Johnston, R., Pattie, C., & Rossiter, D. (2017). A re-dividing nation? A newly polarised electoral geography of Great Britain. *British Politics*, *12*(521-535), 521-535. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-017-0052-x

A re-dividing nation? A newly polarised electoral geography of Great Britain.

Abstract. One feature of the result of the 2015 British general election was the reduction, to a level lower than at any time since 1945, in the number of marginal constituencies. This paper shows that the main reason for this was the change in the level and pattern of support then for the country's smaller parties, compared to the previous election in 2010. Although support for the two largest parties – Conservative and Labour – changed very little, nevertheless the 2015 result meant that each had fewer marginal seats to defend and more safe seats where its continued incumbency was virtually assured. After the 2015 election, Labour's chances of becoming the largest, let alone the majority, party in the House of Commons were slight unless it achieves a swing of some six percentage points.

Keywords: spatial polarisation; electoral geography; marginal and safe seats

Introduction

In the 1980s there was much concern about a growing electoral and political division in Great Britain, usually expressed in shorthand as a north-south divide (Johnston et al., 1988). Such concern dissipated after 1997 with New Labour's electoral success, when – especially in 1997 and 2001 – it won a substantial number of seats in what was previously considered relatively safe Conservative territory. However, Labour's loss of power in 2010 and subsequent defeat in 2015 witnessed the opening up of a new divide, which could have major consequences for the outcome of the next election.

Both of those periods – 1983-1992 and 2010-2015 – have been characterised by a relatively small number of marginal constituencies. One discussion of the number of marginals shows that they fell to their lowest number since 1955 in 1983 (Curtice, 2015, 28: Figure 1). There was then a recovery, though at its peak the number of marginal constituencies in 1997 and 2001 was less than at any election prior to 1974. After a further decline only 85 constituencies (out of 632 in Great Britain) qualified as marginal at the 2010 election. The number declined again to 74 in 2015 – the smallest over the sixteen elections studied, and less than half that recorded in the five contests during the period 1955-1970.

Curtice's definition of marginal seats – those where the Conservative share of the (Conservative plus Labour) vote total would be between 45-55 per cent if there were a uniform shift across British constituencies so that the two parties had equal shares of the national vote total – presents a valid picture of the situation when those parties predominated but is less relevant to the situation at later elections when other parties were challenging for, and occasionally winning, seats. But his argument regarding the declining number of marginal constituencies still holds for the more recent contests when such additional contests are included. After the 2010 election, for example, as well as 120 constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour occupied first and second places with majorities over the other of less than ten percentage points there were also 40 where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats shared first and second places separated by a margin of less than 10 percentage points; another 27 had the same margin between Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates occupying the first two places (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). Additionally there were three seats in Scotland where the SNP occupied one of the first two places with a margin of victory less than ten points; a further three in Wales where Plaid Cymru came either first or second; and the Green

party's MP won Brighton Pavilion by 2.4 points. This gave an overall total of 194 seats where the gap between the winner and the second-placed party was less than 10 percentage points. After the 2015 election, that total had fallen to 126, a reduction of over one-third: 85 had the Conservatives and Labour in the first two places; 13, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats; 5, Labour and Liberal Democrats; one each involving the Conservatives and Labour with a UKIP candidate in second place, plus Clacton where UKIP's candidate defeated the Conservative; there were nine in Scotland involving the SNP and two in Wales involving Plaid Cymru.

A corollary of fewer marginal constituencies has been a growth in the number of very safe seats, defined here as those won by a margin of 20 percentage points or more. There were 274 after the 2010 election – 145 won by the Conservatives, 115 by Labour, 12 by the Liberal Democrats, one by Plaid Cymru, and one by the Speaker.[1] Five years later that number had increased by almost 100, to 372: 209 of them were won by the Conservatives, 134 by Labour and 28 by the SNP – plus that held by the Speaker.

There were thus several major changes to the country's electoral geography between 2010 and 2015. At the first election in that pair, for example, 31 per cent of all constituencies in Great Britain were marginal (where the winning candidate's vote share exceeded that of the second placed candidate by less than 10 percentage points); 43 per cent were won by a margin of more than 20 points and therefore were unlikely to be lost at the next contest unless there was a very major shift in voters' preferences. At the 2015 election, the comparable percentages of marginal and safe seats were 20 and 59 respectively. The number of marginal seats had declined by just over one-third while the number of very safe seats had increased by almost exactly the same rate. This is a very substantial change: accounting for it is the purpose of the remainder of this paper, by exploring the other major changes between those two elections – the rapid growth in support for the SNP, UKIP and the Green party, and the substantial decline in voting for the Liberal Democrats. That explanation is set in the framework of a classic work on the spatial patterning of votes, illustrating how particular situations can be viewed as exemplars of general models.

Electoral Geographical Foundations

In their classic study of *Seats, Votes, and the Spatial Organisation of Elections*, Gudgin and Taylor (1979) showed that the translation of votes into seats in first-past-the-post electoral systems is a function of three factors: the degree of spatial concentration of the supporters of each political party; the degree to which the areas where a party's supporters are concentrated are clustered together; and the configuration of the constituency map superimposed on those two geographies. They showed that the number of seats won by a party is a function not only of its vote share but also how those votes are distributed across the relevant territory. Thus, for example, a party which wins nearly 13 per cent of the votes cast but with them fairly evenly spread may win very few seats indeed (UKIP's experience at the 2015 general election) whereas another with less than 5 per cent but all of them concentrated in one part of the territory only may win many more (the SNP at that election). As Johnston et al. (2012) have shown, it was rare at elections prior to 2015 for parties with less than 30 per cent of the votes cast in a constituency to win that seat, whereas with more than 45 per cent they were almost certain to. Between 40 and 45 per cent, however, whereas Labour tended to win all such seats, the Conservatives only won about three-quarters and the Liberal Democrats less than half. Those differences reflect the operation of the geographical factors identified by Gudgin and Taylor.

Between the 1945 and 1970 general elections, inclusive, British politics were dominated by two parties that between them won most of the votes and even more of the seats. However, the Conservatives tended to gain more seats relative to their vote share compared to Labour because of

differences in the geography of their vote-winning. Labour tended to pile up more surplus votes in each seat won than did the Conservatives because it amassed very large majorities in mining and industrial areas.[2] In the terms of the Gudgin/Taylor model the areas where Labour's supporters were concentrated (the first of their components) were spatially more clustered (the second of the components) than were those areas where partisan preferences favoured the Conservatives. As a consequence the Conservatives' votes were more effective at delivering representation in the House of Commons (on which see Johnston et al., 2001; Curtice, 2009, 2010; Curtice et al, 2010, 2015). Against this pro-Conservative operation of the electoral system, however, there were other aspects of the geography of voting that favoured Labour. It tended to get a larger share of the seats than of the votes because of variations in both constituency size and number of abstentions; on average Labour-held seats were smaller (in the number of electors) and had lower turnouts, so that fewer votes were need to win them than in the larger, higher-turnout Conservative-held seats. Which party benefited overall reflected the relative importance of these three components – electorate size, abstentions, and efficiency of the vote distribution – at each election (Johnston et al., 2001).

The 1974 general elections introduced a major change, with the share of the vote total going to Labour and the Conservatives falling, though much more so than their share of the seats. This was because of the relative success of the Liberals, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party (SNP). The first of these in particular suffered from the geographical problem faced by many small parties in first-past-the-post (fptp) electoral systems; its 1974 vote shares (19.3 per cent at the February election and 18.3 per cent in October) were fairly evenly distributed across the constituencies contested, delivering only 14 seats at the first contest and 13 at the second (out of 629). Over the subsequent decades it (and successor parties, now the Liberal Democrats) focused its campaigning geographically to get increased vote shares in particular areas where there were clusters of support. It increased its share of the seats accordingly, though it was still substantially under-represented; in 2010, 23 per cent of the votes delivered only 57 seats (9 per cent of Great Britain's total). Geography continued to militate against it, but alongside its successes it also built strong foundations across substantial tracts of the country where its candidates occupied second place.

For Plaid Cymru and the SNP their restriction to contesting seats in particular parts of Great Britain only, and within each of those parts to concentrating on certain districts (north and west Wales for Plaid Cymru, for example), meant that for them the disadvantages experienced by the Liberals were less pronounced. In 2010, Plaid Cymru won 0.6 per cent of votes cast in Great Britain and three (0.5 per cent) of the seats. The SNP were less favourably treated, largely because their concentrations of support were not as tightly clustered spatially as Plaid Cymru's; with 1.7 per cent of the votes the SNP got six (0.9 per cent) of the MPs elected. But five years later, the SNP gained 4.7 per cent of Britain's votes and 56 (8.9 per cent) of the seats; in Scotland it won exactly half of all of the votes cast and benefited from those being fairly evenly distributed across the country.

These emerging post-1970 spatial distributions of party support created a new geography of party competition. Up until then almost every seat had the Conservative and Labour candidates occupying first and second places at each election. The growth of support for the Liberal Democrats changed that. It is an established feature of fptp electoral systems – Duverger's Law – that multi-party contests are rare and the emergence of a third party in some places is usually at the cost of the weaker of the established larger two (Grofman et al., 2009). In Great Britain this initially involved the Liberal Democrats displacing Labour as the second party across considerable parts of southern England; not only were Labour candidates relegated to third place there but they tended to occupy poor third-places (Johnston and Pattie, 2011), and the constituencies became predominantly Conservative-Liberal Democrat contests (as Duverger's Law would predict). In the first part of the twenty-first century Liberal Democrats also became the main challenger in some Labour seats,

especially those with large student populations, with the Conservative candidates pushed into poor third places.

To some commentators, by 2010 English politics approximated a three- rather than a two-party system,[3] but although that applied to the national distribution of votes and seats it was not the case across the constituencies. Instead, the country was characterised, as Table 1 shows, by four two-party systems. Seats with Labour and the Conservatives occupying the first two places and Liberal Democrats a poor third formed the modal category, but there were substantial numbers where one of those parties shared the first two places with the Liberal Democrats. There were also 30 seats where Labour and the SNP occupied the first two places, and just sixteen others (out of 632) with a different combination.

This geography of four constituency contest types, superimposed upon the individual parties' support geographies, provided the matrix within which a major shift occurred in 2015 – leading to the reduction in the number of marginal and growth of very safe seats discussed above. Understanding why is the focus of the next section.

More Secure Heartlands, Fewer Contested Territories

Compared to the 2010 election, the result in 2015 had two major components. At its core was the contest between the two largest parties, where very little changed. As Table 2 shows, their vote totals altered only slightly, and this lack of significant change was replicated locally, with few seats changing allegiance: the Conservatives lost ten seats to, and gained eight from, Labour.

The second component involved the smaller-party 'periphery', where there was very substantial change. The Liberal Democrats' vote share declined by nearly two-thirds; UKIP's share almost quadrupled, as did the Greens'; and although the SNP's share of the British total in 2015 was less than double its 2010 performance, in Scotland its share increased by two-thirds, giving it half of the total number of votes cast there. Seat numbers reflected the interaction between these changes and the support geographies they produced. The SNP, with a fairly even distribution across Scotland, won all but three of the 59 seats there. The Liberal Democrats returned to the typical position of a small party with few major clusters of substantial support (i.e. 40 per cent or more), and retained only 8 of the 57 constituencies won in 2010 (Thrasher et al., 2016); 27 were lost to the Conservatives, 12 to Labour and 10 to the SNP. That same geographical effect meant that both UKIP and the Greens won only a single seat each; their advance in the polls was too regular across most of the country – although neither performed well in Scotland – for them to be rewarded by seats in the House of Commons.

But why were these changes also associated with the reduction in the number of marginal seats and the expansion of safe ones? The geographies of the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote and the rise of support for UKIP and the SNP are key to answering that question.

In Scotland, the situation was straightforward. Not only did the SNP win 50 per cent of the votes nationally, it won over 50 per cent in 35 of the 59 constituencies and less than 40 per cent in only five (including the three that it failed to win). Further, its majority exceeded 20 percentage points in 28 of the seats and less than 5 points in only six. The SNP predominated across the country.

Elsewhere, it was the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote and the failure of UKIP's growth to match that decline which eliminated many marginal seats and created more safe ones. This is because the Liberal Democrats' vote losses were not taken up by just one of the other parties; instead several parties attracted former Liberal Democrat supporters. As a consequence, in most

constituencies where the Liberal Democrats had performed well in 2010 the other large party – either Conservative or Labour – won by an increased majority in 2015, even if its own vote share didn't increase, as illustrated in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 concerns the seats where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats occupied the first two places at the 2010 contest. The left-hand pair of columns refers to the 167 seats won by the Conservatives, who averaged 50.9 per cent of the votes there in 2010 and three points more in 2015; their mean majority in 2010 was 23 percentage points. The Liberal Democrats' share fell by 11.5 points and UKIP's share increased by 10.3 (in most cases from a low base), but the mean Conservative majority over the second-placed party widened by over half to 37.5 points. For example, in the three most marginal seats in that group in 2010, the Conservative majorities over the Liberal Democrats were 0.2 percentage points (Camborne & Redruth), 0.3 points (Oxford West & Abingdon), and 0.9 points (Truro & Falmouth): in 2015 the majorities in those three were 15.2, 16.8 and 27.2 points respectively. (Labour came second in Camborne & Redruth in 2015.)

A very similar pattern occurred in the 27 seats won by the Liberal Democrats from second-placed Conservative candidates in 2010 (the right-hand columns in Table 3). The mean Liberal Democrat vote share dropped by 17.8 points in 2015, whereas all of the other parties had a small increase. As a result an average Liberal Democrat majority of 9.4 points at the first contest became an average Conservative majority of 12.4 points five years later.

Table 4 shows an even greater change in the seats where Labour came first in 2010 with the Liberal Democrats second: an average Labour majority of 21.3 points then was enlarged to 26.6 points in 2015. The Liberal Democrats retained second place in none of those 73 seats: the Conservatives replaced them in 46, UKIP in 23, the Greens in three and the SNP in the other.

The collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote in the seats it contested with the Conservatives and Labour in 2010 was responsible for the creation of many larger majorities there five years later, therefore. Because none of the other parties replaced it as a strong contender to the incumbent party, the latter gained more safe seats as a consequence. But what happened in the seats where the Conservatives and Labour occupied first and second places in 2010, where there was also a reduction in the number of marginal seats in 2015? Figure 2 shows the change in the Conservative vote share in each of the Conservative-Labour marginals held by the Conservatives (arranged in degree of marginality from left – the most marginal – to right). In all but three, the Conservative share increased, by more than 8 points. But the majority of marginal seats won by Labour in 2010 had an increase in the Labour vote share (Figure 3); it declined in just nine of the 59.

These shifts suggest that in general support for the two parties diverged in those marginal seats; each became relatively stronger in those it was defending. Of course in some of the Conservative-held marginals although the Conservative vote share increased the Labour share may have increased even more, making the seat more marginal, and perhaps delivering a Labour victory. But that was rare. Figure 4 shows the change for each of the two parties in the 2010 Conservative-held marginals. Those to the left of the diagonal had a greater increase in the Labour than the Conservative vote share between 2010 and 2015 – and they were very much in the minority (with only nine transferring their allegiance to Labour). In most of those marginals, the gap between the Conservatives and Labour widened. In the Labour-held marginals, on the other hand (Figure 5), in the majority of cases the Labour vote share increased by more than the Conservatives' (the constituencies to the right of the diagonal), with eight of those where the opposite was the case being Conservative gains. In seats won by Labour in 2010 and retained in 2015, the mean majority over the Conservatives was 6.1 percentage points in 2010 and 10.2 points in 2015, whilst in those marginals won by the Conservatives and then held again in 2015 the comparable means were 4.0

and 9.2. On average the gap between the two parties widened substantially in the marginal seats – in most cases favouring the 2010 winner there.

Why was there a widening divide between the two parties in their marginal seats? Curtice et al. (2015, 418) argue that a personal vote against the general trend for incumbent candidates elected in 2010 for the first time helped several Conservative candidates win again in marginal constituencies, whereas several of those gained by Labour were seats with relatively large ethnic minority populations. In Conservative-held marginals, the mean change in the Conservative vote share between 2010 and 2015 in seats fought by first-time incumbents was an increase of 4.6 percentage points whereas in those fought by MPs elected prior to 2010 it was 3.5 points; there was a wider difference in the change in Labour's vote share in Labour-held marginals, a mean increase of 5.9 points in those defended by first-time incumbents and of 3.0 in those whose Labour MP was first elected before 2010.

Across all of the Conservative-Labour marginal constituencies, however, a further significant cause of the widening gap between the two parties was the collapse in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote there: those 'lost votes' were differently distributed across other parties depending on whether the Conservatives or Labour won the seat in 2010. Table 5 shows the votes by supporters at the 2015 election according to which of the three largest parties they voted for in those seats in 2010, derived from the 2015 weighted British Election Study panel survey. (That survey under-represented the number of abstainers, but that is unlikely to have significantly affected the balance in the flows across the parties.) Thus in the Conservative-held Conservative-Labour marginal seats (the top panel in Table 5) the Liberal Democrats retained only 12 per cent of their support, with 36 per cent going to Labour and 28 per cent to the Conservatives, a ratio of 1.29 between Labour and Conservative. In the Labour-held marginals (the lower panel) not only did the Liberal Democrats retain a larger share of their 2010 support, but many more of those who switched their allegiance moved to Labour rather than to the Conservatives (a ratio of 2.80).[4] These differences enabled Labour to extend its lead over the Conservatives in Labour-held marginal seats, with the relatively small shifts from the Liberal Democrats (or from the Conservatives and Labour) to UKIP and the Greens not ameliorating those movements.[5] Although local situations influenced the changes in some seats, such as the better-than-average performance of incumbent MPs defending their constituencies for the first time that many marginal seats, both Conservative- and Labour-held, became safer for their incumbent party in 2015 reflected the differential waning of Liberal Democrat support there. Indeed, the relative success of first-time incumbent MPs may well have at least in part been a consequence of them being better able than other candidates to attract votes from former Liberal Democrat supporters.

The results of these various processes are shown in Tables 6 and 7. Table 6 indicates the situation for each of the seven parties that won seats in 2015. For three of them – Labour, Conservative and SNP – it illustrates the extent of their secure heartlands, with substantial numbers of safe and very safe seats each and relatively few that are marginal. For the other four, it shows that apart from the seats that they won in 2015, many of them by small margins only, there were very few seats that they lost then but by relatively small margins suggesting that they might be winnable at the next election. Table 7 focuses on the changed situation facing the Labour and Conservative parties between the 2010 and 2015 general elections; a much reduced number of marginal seats won and lost and many more that were either safe (won by margins of 20 percentage points or more) or hopeless (lost by the same extent) in 2015 than 2010.

Conclusions

The geography of the distribution of votes for each of the political parties, and that of abstentions, is a crucial influence on how many seats each party wins, as is the geography of constituency boundaries laid across those distributions. At any given share of the votes certain geographies – their degrees of concentration and clustering of support – are more favourable towards some parties than others in the translation of votes into seats. Those general patterns are well-established, so when one of more of the geographies changes so too, as Gudgin and Taylor clearly demonstrated, should the outcome of the translation process. That is currently the case in Great Britain: the 2015 general election saw major changes in the vote shares won by all but one of the smaller parties – the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, UKIP, and the SNP, but not Plaid Cymru. Those changes influenced not only how many seats each won but also, indirectly, the prospects of the two largest parties – Conservatives and Labour – at the next election, even though their own vote shares and distributions (outside Scotland) altered very little.

In Scotland the change involved the SNP increasing its vote share to 50 per cent of the total not only overall but also in most of the seats, with the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats suffering substantial losses. Not only did the SNP win almost all of the seats, most were won with substantial majorities that can only be overturned by a major shift in voters' preferences. In England and Wales, the fall in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote and the increases in support for UKIP and the Greens meant that each of those three parties had a relatively even distribution of support across the country, as was the case for the SNP. But whereas the SNP had a large plurality of the votes in most places, the three smaller parties in England and Wales experienced the disadvantage of an even distribution when their overall share was small: they not only won few seats in those places where concentrations of their supporters were clustered but also failed to gain enough votes to make them strong challengers at the next election. As a result, the Conservatives and Labour won relatively more safe seats where they will be difficult to remove and most of their marginal seats became safer as a result of the Liberal Democrat collapse – which favoured each of the other two parties in its own marginals.

Those changes in the first two geographical components of Gudgin and Taylor's model – the concentration and clustering of parties' supporters – mean that major change in the composition of the House of Commons at the next general election is as a consequence unlikely unless there is a substantial shift in support overall for several of the parties. As it stands, the situation after the 2015 election make a Labour victory at the next contest unlikely; an increase in support for the Conservatives relative to Labour could see it achieve a clear majority based on winning many of the Labour-held marginals shown in Table 7. The electorally-divided nation of the 1980s reflected polarised geographies of support for the two main parties then. A new electorally-divided nation from 2015 on reflects polarised support for three parties – the Conservatives, Labour and the SNP. Geography, it seems, is ossifying the country's electoral map, which can only be changed if there are major shifts in support for all of the political parties.

Notes

[1] The Speaker's seat is by convention not contested by the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats; he won in Buckingham by more than 20 points in both 2010 and 2015.

[2] Rodden (2010; Chen and Rodden, 2013) has shown that this situation affects left-leaning parties in a number of countries: their votes are spatially more concentrated and clustered than their main opponents'.

[3] See, for example, J. Blumenau and S. Hix, 'Britain's evolving multi-party systems', *LSE British Politics and Policy Blog*, 31 March 2015, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/britains-evolving-multi-party-systems/ (accessed 1 December 2016).

[4] A chi-square test on the raw data showed a statistically significant difference ($p<0.001$) between the two distributions: Liberal Democrat voters in 2010 were more likely to switch their support to Labour if they lived in a Labour-held marginal constituency than if they lived in one that was Conservative-held.

[5] Curtice et al. (2015, 418) also show that several of the seats that Labour won from the Conservatives in 2015 had large Black and Minority Ethnic populations: in four the mean percentage White was 94 per cent; in the other six it was 64 per cent.

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Table 1: The distribution of contest types at the 2010 and 2015 general elections in Great Britain.

Parties Occupying First/Second Places	2010	2015
Conservative-Labour	287	376
Conservative-Liberal Democrat	204	50
Labour-Liberal Democrat	95	11
Labour-SNP	30	42
Conservative-UKIP	0	76
Labour-UKIP	0	44
Other	15	32
TOTAL*	631	631

* All totals exclude the seat held by the Speaker

Table 2: The percentage share of the votes won by the main political parties at the 2010 and 2015 general elections in Great Britain.

	2010	2015
Conservative	36.9	37.7
Labour	29.7	31.1
Liberal Democrat	23.6	8.1
Green	1.0	3.8
UKIP	3.2	12.9
SNP	1.7	4.9
PC	0.6	0.6

Table 3: Changes in the mean vote shares won by the parties in different constituency types where the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were the leading parties at the 2010 and 2015 general elections

	Mean Vote Share		Mean Vote Share	
	2010	2015	2010	2015
Seats won by the Conservatives in both 2010 and 2015, with Liberal Democrats second in 2010			*Seats won by the Liberal Democrats in 2010 with Conservatives second*	
Conservative	50.9	53.9	38.5	42.6
Liberal Democrat	27.9	16.4	47.9	30.2
Labour	13.4	9.7	7.7	10.8
UKIP	4.2	14.5	3.4	11.1
Green	1.0	4.6	0.7	4.4
Mean Majority				
Conservative	23.2	35.1		12.5
Liberal Democrat			9.4	
Number of Constituencies	167		27	

Table 4: Changes in the mean vote shares won by the parties in different constituency types where Labour and the Liberal Democrats were the leading parties at the 2010 and 2015 general elections

	Mean Vote Share		Mean Vote Share	
	2010	2015	2010	2015
Seats won by Labour in both 2010 and 2015, with Liberal Democrats second in 2010			*Seats won by Liberal Democrats in 2010 with Labour second*	
Labour	47.3	53.6	32.6	45.0
Liberal Democrat	26.0	6.3	41.5	23.7
Conservative	16.4	17.0	17.8	14.5
UKIP	2.3	11.9	2.5	8.8
Green	1.3	5.6	1.5	7.0
Mean Majority				
Labour	21.2	35.2		18.5
Liberal Democrat			8.9	
Number of Constituencies	73		11	

Table 5: Changes in individual voters' choices between the 2010 and 2015 general elections (% of row totals) in Conservative-Labour marginal constituencies according to the 2010 result*

	2015 Vote (%)				
2010 Vote	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	UKIP	Green
Seats won by the Conservatives in 2010					
Conservative	83	6	2	8	1
Labour	8	83	1	5	1
Liberal Democrat	28	36	12	14	7
Seats won by Labour in 2010					
Conservative	77	8	1	12	1
Labour	7	84	3	4	1
Liberal Democrat	15	42	21	8	12

* Marginal constituencies are those won by the named party with a majority of less than 10 percentage points.

Table 6: The distribution of seats according to their margin of victory/defeat for each party at the 2015 general election

	Labour	Cons.	LibDem	UKIP	Green	Plaid	SNP
Hopeless	284	200	581	605	629	34	0
Little Chance	67	54	26	22	0	1	0
Marginal Lost	48	47	16	3	1	2	3
Marginal Won	48	56	7	1	0	0	6
Safe	49	65	1	0	1	3	22
Very Safe	135	209	0	0	0	0	28
TOTAL*	631	631	631	631	631	40	59
Per cent marginal**	15.2	16.3	3.6	0.6	0.2	5.0	15.3

Key to seat types: Hopeless – lost by 20 percentage points or more; Little Chance – lost by 10-19 percentage points; Marginal Lost – lost by 0-9 percentage points; Marginal Won – won by 0-9 points; Safe – won by 10-19 percentage points; Very Safe – won by 20 percentage points or more.

* All totals exclude the seat held by the Speaker
** Marginal seats are those won or lost by a margin of less than 10 points

Table 7: The distribution of margins of defeat/victory for the Labour and Conservative parties at the 2010 and 2015 general elections (marginal constituencies are shown in bold).

	Labour		Conservative	
Margin of Loss/Win	2010	2015	2010	2015
-20<	247	284	168	200
-15 : -20	16	31	31	28
-10 : -15	35	36	42	26
-5 : -10	**33**	**27**	**55**	**26**
0 : -5	**42**	**21**	**30**	**21**
0 : 5	**31**	**20**	**41**	**26**
5 : 10	**48**	**28**	**40**	**30**
10 : 15	35	26	48	39
15 : 20	29	23	28	26
20<	115	135	148	209
N*	631	631	631	631
Per cent marginal**	24.4	15.2	26.3	16.3

* All totals exclude the seat held by the Speaker

** Marginal seats are those won or lost by a margin of less than 10 points

Figure 1: The number of marginal seats in Great Britain, 1955-2015 (after Curtice, 2015).

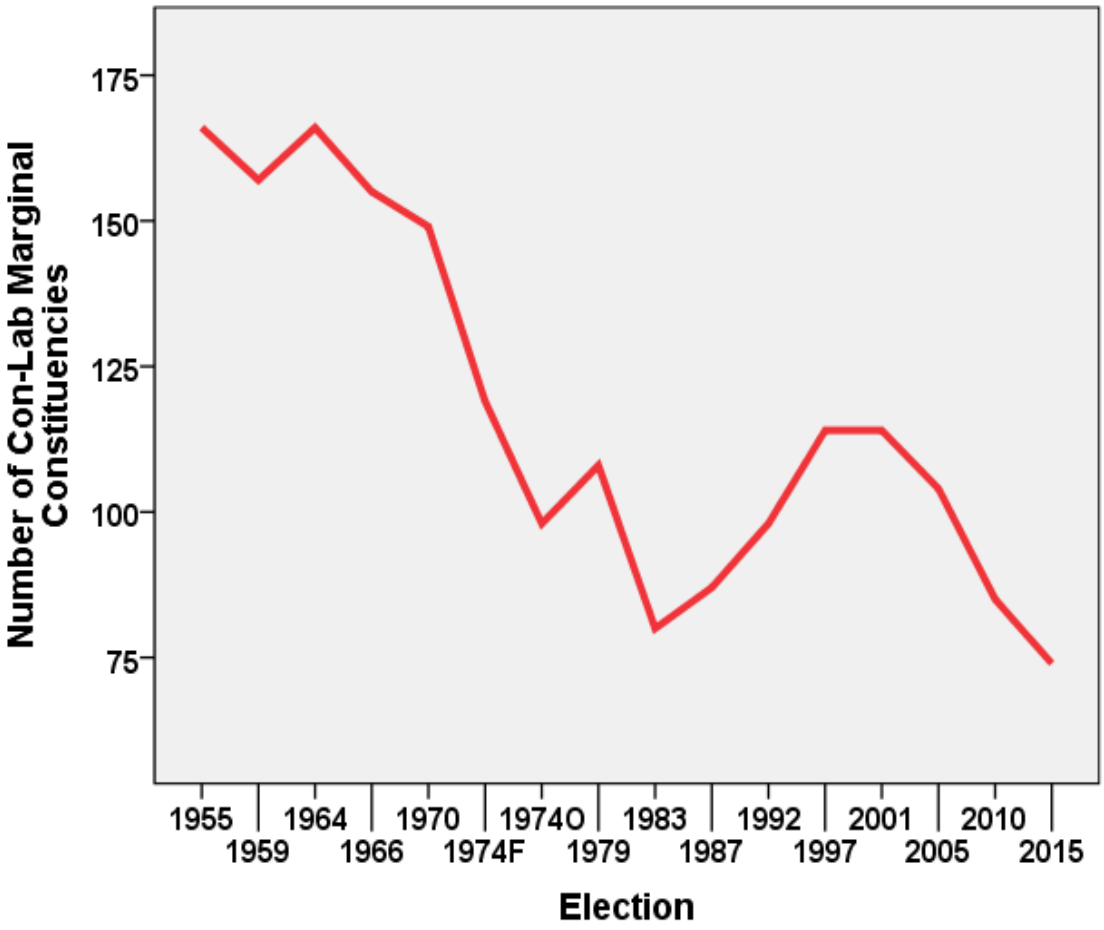

Figure 2: Change in the Conservative vote share 2010-2015 in Conservative-held marginal seats.

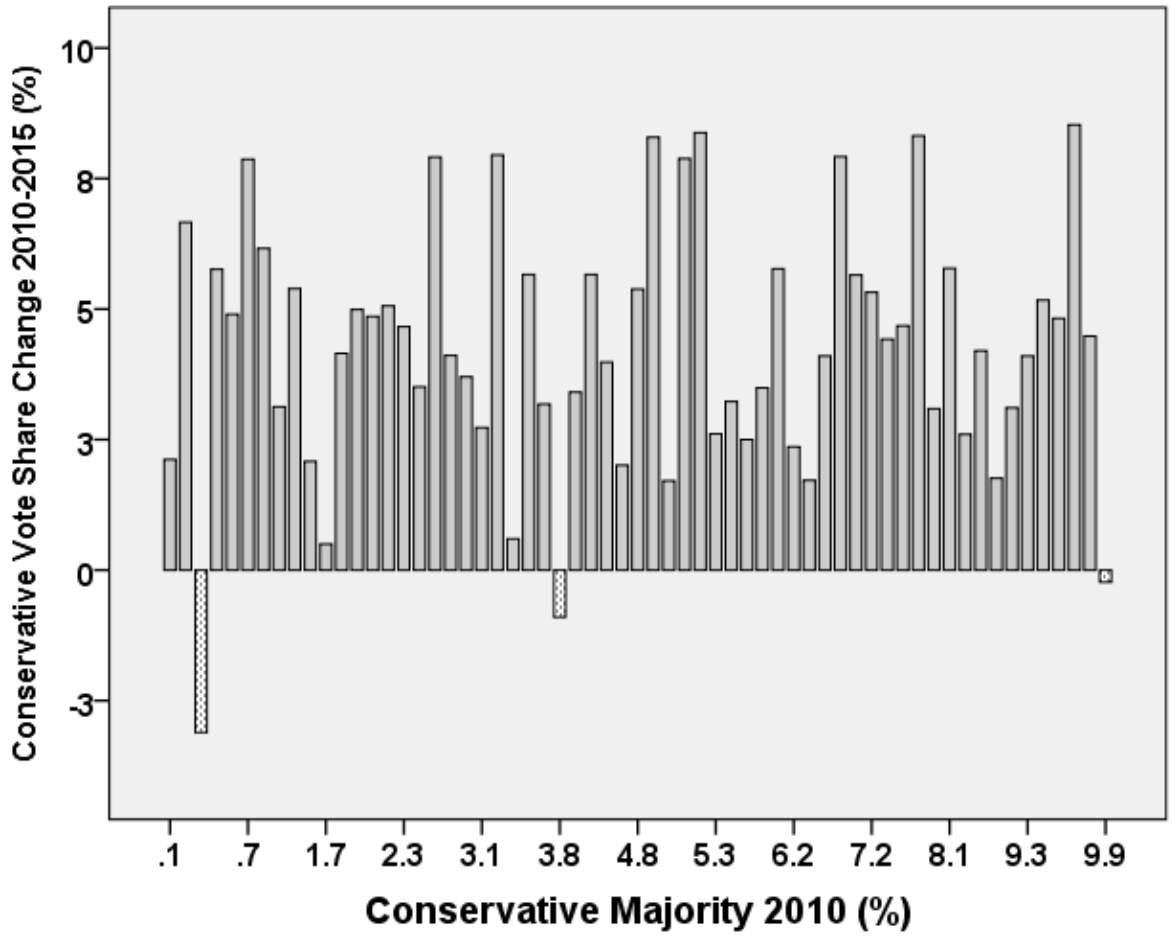

Figure 3: Change in the Labour vote share 2010-2015 in Labour-held marginal seats.

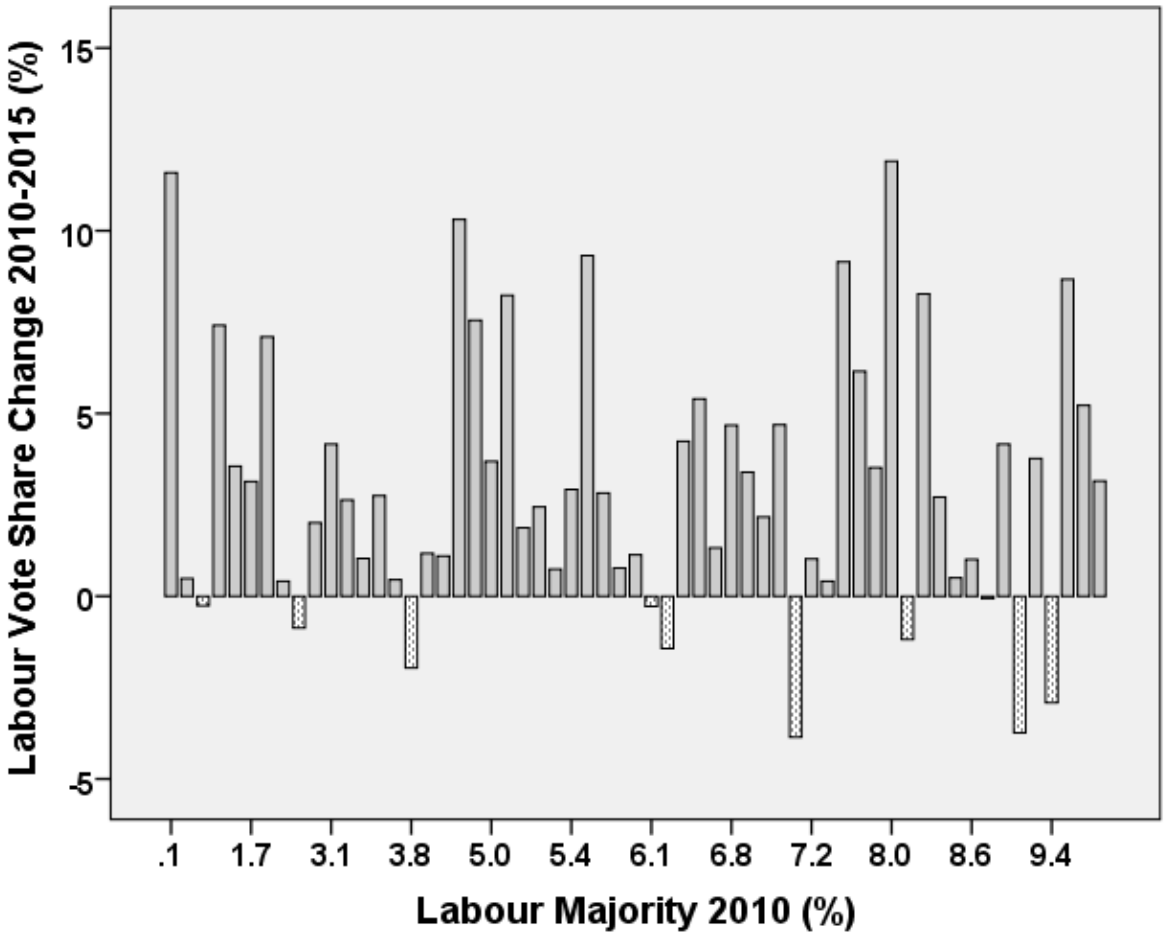

Figure 4: Change in Conservative and Labour vote shares, 2010-2015, in Conservative-held marginal seats.

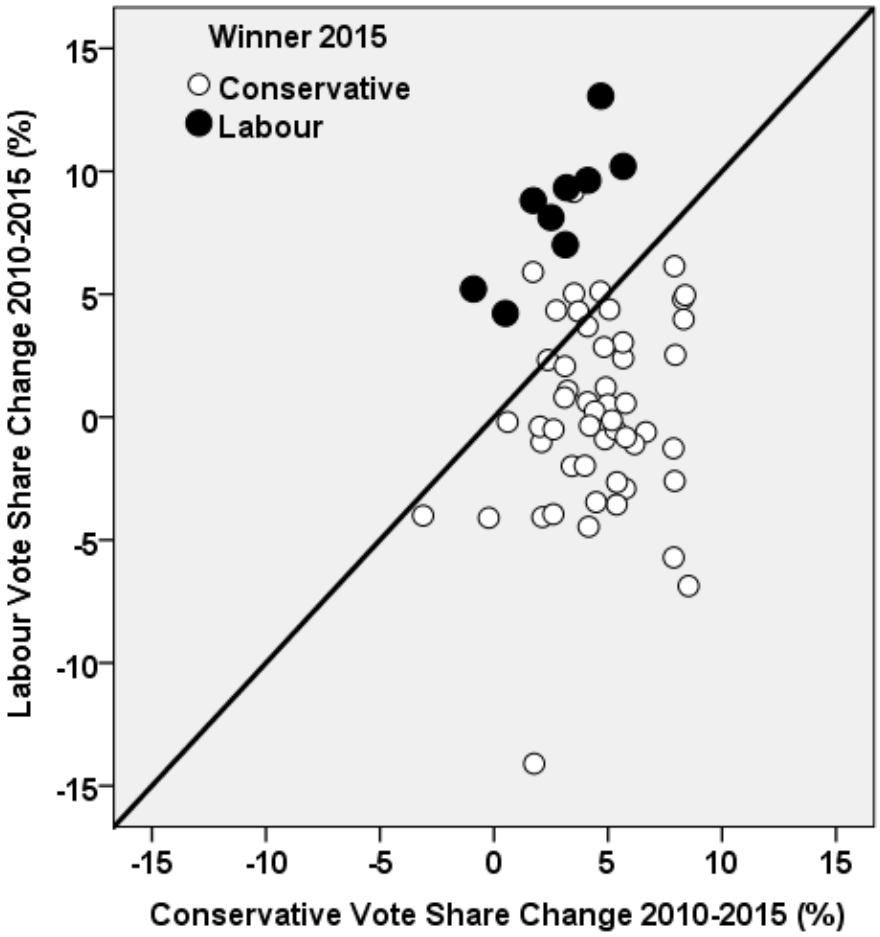

Figure 5: Change in Labour and Conservative vote shares, 2010-2015, in Labour-held marginal seats.